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by Vance Packard

by Elmer J. F. Arndt

# social action

November, 1961

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## ditorial

How can we pray for daily bread, with lip  
Still smacking from a comfortable meal,  
Or how, from Dives lofty table feel  
With Lazarus the glow of fellowship,  
Unless, with spirits destitute, we find  
Fellowship in the deserts of the mind.

—From the *Naylor Sonnets* by KENNETH BOULDING

This quotation from a sonnet by Professor Boulding highlights one of the central problems of our abundance for American Christians. We rejoice in the new abundance and give thanks that man can develop the God-given resources of the earth to provide enough and to spare. But, as one marketing consultant says, "America is experiencing a revolution in self-indulgence." His publication *Motivations* said that one of the central problems of the day was to give people permission to enjoy their prosperity, to feel moral, not immoral, in their hedonism (quoted from Packard: *THE WASTE MAKERS*). Yet our self-indulgence and plenty are in glaring contrast to the need of the world.

Barbara Ward in her latest book *INDIA AND THE WEST* puts the challenge this way: "How can one look through the picture window with vision enough to see the starving men, bundled in bags, lying on Calcutta's pavements? Just so did the nobles of France ignore the peasants starving at their castle gates."

The problem in addition is not limited to international considerations. We still have pockets of poverty in the United States that need our thought and action. One-fifth of our population continues to live close to the poverty line or below it in spite of our new capacity to produce abundance. In 1959, 7½ million families had incomes under \$2,000, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce; 6.2 million single persons had cash incomes under \$2,000; 50 million people in multi-person families had cash incomes under \$4,000.

It is our hope that these pages may provide occasion for many individuals and groups in churches to think more penetratingly about the nature and destiny of man's life, his stewardship responsibilities, the pockets of poverty in our midst, and what is required to witness to the Christian ethic of neighbor love in the economy of abundance we have achieved.





## Abundance: problems and potentials

Our society is starting to face an unprecedented kind of situation. Through the ages Man has struggled, sometimes desperately, to gain enough material goods including food to provide a tolerable existence. In his struggle he has also sought to gain a few more free hours from the struggle each week.

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By Vance Packard, author of *THE HIDDEN PERSUADERS*, *THE STATUS SEEKERS*, and *THE WASTE MAKERS*; United Church of Christ layman.

Now we are seeing a technological break-through on a massive, indeed fantastic, scale that is drastically changing the conditions of our existence.

Americans are finding that their capacity to pour out a profusion of goods with less and less human effort is starting to confront them not only with abundance but with new and baffling kinds of domestic problems.

### **Consumer levels**

Per capita consumption in the U.S. has doubled in the past two decades. One of the nation's leading marketing experts in fact has contended that Americans will need to step up their consumption by nearly 50 per cent within a dozen years if the economy is to continue humming. In earlier times it took hundreds of years to gain such an increase in individual consumption levels.

The goods flowing in profusion today from the nation's automated cornucopias are producing great visible evidences of wealth. Islands of poverty remain, but there are usually special circumstances. The people are usually either infirm, or aged, or belong to a minority group, or are migratory workers, or live in an area that has been abandoned by a major employer, or suffer technological unemployment. Such people may still suffer haunting anxieties about where their basic necessities of life are to come from. But Americans in general own more and more possessions with each passing year and have more and more leisure. According to a Nielsen survey Americans today are spending 37 per cent more time watching television than they are in all productive activities (all forms of work).

### **Leisure increases consumption**

The people in charge of selling products, incidentally, have noted with considerable interest the fact that as people gain more leisure time they tend to consume more goods. This fact has given industrialists a new reason for viewing with a lessening sense of outrage labor's demand for shorter work weeks.

This ever-rising output of goods, on the other hand, is also raising serious problems of at least temporary saturation of markets. Last year when consumers were breaking all-time records in their spending for goods, *U.S. News and World Re-*

port suggested that the U.S. cornucopia was working perhaps too well. It stated:

Goods are superabundant. Unsold cars in the hands of dealers are at a near record level. So are inventories of many kinds of household equipment. Steel output is having to be cut back.

### **The challenge**

In many executive suites, corporate officers have been finding that their most challenging problem is not production but getting the products into the hands of the consumers. Ernest Dale, Cornell University professor in business administration, has observed: "Marketing men across America are facing a fact that is hard for them to swallow. America's capacity to produce may have outstripped its capacity to consume."

Today consumption remains near an all-time high, and yet unused productive capacity has been mounting steadily for several years. Most industries could turn out in nine months all the goods that they can hope to sell in a year. Meanwhile for nearly a decade unemployment has been inching upward and is becoming more and more difficult to hold to easily manageable proportions, regardless of the general state of the economy.

### **Growth, the magic word**

One result of all these pressures has been an outpouring of calls upon the American people to consume more. Despite the evidence of glutted markets for many commodities the President's economic advisers talk hopefully of getting production up to "full capacity." "Growth" has become the magic word as both governmental and corporate spokesmen have urged that the nation's economy be made to grow 50 to 100 per cent faster than it has been growing. One is reminded of the Red Queen in *Alice in Wonderland* who kept crying to Alice, "Faster! Faster!"

Out of all these pressures to grow has come a search by U.S. marketers to find appeals and strategies that will move goods in the new era of affluence. The need for such strategies and new concepts was stated most bluntly by a marketing consultant, Victor Lebow, when he said a few years ago in *The Journal of Retailing*: "We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced and discarded at an ever-increasing rate."



## STRATEGIES TAKE MANY FORMS

The strategies that have been developed take many forms. But a common characteristic of many of them is that they encourage a carefree or a wasteful attitude toward material possessions (in order that they may be consumed more rapidly). I would stress that these strategies are not unique to the U.S. They are starting to be explored with interest in other advanced industrialized nations starting to face the same pressures. Just a few days ago a Dutch shipbuilder told me that one of the urgent needs of his country was to persuade his thrifty countrymen to throw things away at a faster rate. His own industry, he complained, was suffering from over-production because ships were being kept in service too long.

Here in summary form are seven of the more common approaches being made to induce the consumer to consume more.

### **Selling more per consumer**

One is the strategy of selling more per customer. It is perhaps understandable that a marketer, when confronted with near-saturation for his product, will decide that each prospect should buy more of his product than he has been buying. This thinking was best summed up by a U.S. plywood association that adopted as its slogan, "Every family needs two homes." And a refrigerator maker called for "two refrigerators in every home." A bathing suit manufacturer argues that a woman needs at least three bathing suits. Another form the strategy takes is to upgrade the consumer to ever more complicated and costly models as the U.S. auto industry so successfully did during the 1955-60 era.

### **Throw-away mood**

A second strategy is to promote a throw-away mood. This puts the public on the market for replacements. Thus steaks are now coming in aluminum frying pans that can be thrown away after one use. One of the fastest growing U.S. corporations, Standard Packaging, makes among other things trays that can be cooked, bowls and other utensils that can be discarded after use. They explain happily that "everything we make is thrown away." *Sales Management* magazine, in commenting on their phenomenal success, said that as the company saw the future, "Tomorrow, more than ever, our lives will be 'disposable.'"

## **Obsolescence of quality**

A third strategy is to create obsolescence of quality. This approach, when used, is perhaps the most questionable of all strategies for maintaining a rising sales curve. In too many cases marketers wondering how to get the existing rug or washing machine or sofa out of the home so that the owner will be on the market for replacements have responded by downgrading quality. It is debatable how much of the admitted downgrading that took place in recent years for many products was planned, how much of it was unplanned and how much of it was simply condoned by producers who just didn't have their heart in making a long-lasting product. In any case it is a fact that a number of leading engineering journals have carried articles or editorials which assumed that some planned obsolescence of quality was occurring and debated the merits and ethics of such an approach.

## **Obsolescence of desirability**

The fourth, and more safe, strategy is to create planned obsolescence of desirability. Here the product is worn out in the owner's mind. In terms of function the product may still be performing admirably, but it has been made to seem hopelessly old-fashioned. To accomplish this you make the public feel that styling is tremendously important in the acceptability of your product. Then if you switch styles the owner of an earlier-styled model may well feel discontented with his still-functioning product. This concept, which was of course inspired by the women's fashion field, has spread to a number of durable goods fields, most particularly motor cars and appliances. There are of course basic long-range swings in style but recently marketers have been doing a great deal to accelerate and manipulate style trends through the use of massive advertising.

## **Buy-now-pay-later appeal**

A fifth approach widely used for expanding sales is by making the buy-now-pay-later appeal. In many instances the extension of credit has changed from being a courtesy to the customer to being a strategy for making him more careless, impulsive and imprudent. When people can buy on installment—or on the never-never as the British so quaintly call it—the selling task



not only is eased but the customers tend to buy more. Also they are less apt to check the product for quality or to examine sharply the price tag. Credit people claim, correctly, that the buy-now-pay-later habit is becoming a "way of life" in the U.S. One of the more disquieting manifestations of this is that now hundreds of department and specialty stores have started offering credit cards to teen-agers, often without requiring parental permission or even awareness.

### **Harvesting youth market**

This suggests a sixth strategy widely used, the harvesting of the youth market. Far more systematic thought and intensive effort are going into selling goods to youngsters than was the case a decade ago. This enthusiastic interest springs from the fact that youngsters are at a habit-forming age in terms of brand images and product uses; they are more easily manipulated than adults; they have three times as much spending power as they did after World War II; and finally there are so many of them, thanks to the recent population explosion. Nearly 1,000,000 people are currently being added to the U.S. population each year and in 22 years the U.S. population is expected to increase by 100,000,000. So far little thought is being given to what this implies for the long run in terms of strain on resources, schools, living room and recreational facilities. Many marketers, however, see them as prospective customers.

### **Mood of hedonism**

The final strategy I would mention is the deliberate promotion of a mood of hedonism. A number of inherent factors such as the growth of leisure, abundance, mobility and continued atomic peril have tended to promote living for the moment and giving it up. It seems fair to say, however, that the mood also has been encouraged deliberately by a great many marketers as, for example, when they ask in their ads, "Why Deny Yourself?" The so-called puritanical inhibitions of Americans have been seen as blocking consumers from enjoying the rich full new way of life. One aspect of this effort to generate hedonism is the widespread effort to promote an itch for newness, and another is the exploitation of sacred days such as Christmas and Easter as seasons for unrestrained splurging.

We have seen then a number of approaches being used to promote a carefree, self-indulgent, extravagant or wasteful mood, in order to promote ever-higher consumption.

They add up to an enormous amount of persuasion aimed at the public. A business journal *Business Week* summed up the massiveness of this persuasion by saying: "It looks as though all our business forces are bent on getting everyone to borrow . . . spend . . . buy . . . waste . . . want." More recently the economic analyst A. A. Berle, Jr., called waste "the most obvious defect of the current American economic system."

### **IMPACT ON THE HUMAN SPIRIT**

All these efforts I believe are having an impact on the human spirit. It is hardly realistic to assume that they merely affect consumption habits. Morality for example becomes involved when you have so many millions being encouraged to live beyond their means and to seek their main satisfactions in life from often narcissistic self-indulgence.

#### **Immature traits encouraged**

Recently I attended an executive seminar in which the psychologist in charge warned personnel directors against hiring for responsible jobs men who were still emotionally immature. I could not help but notice that 8 of the 9 traits he mentioned as revealing such immaturity are traits being widely encouraged in the U.S. public today in order to increase markets: pleasure-mindedness, disregard for consequences, refusal to accept responsibility, show-off tendencies, wishful thinking, destructiveness, selfishness, lack of self-discipline.

A case can be made that the use of these strategies has helped produce the general high level of physical well-being that prevails throughout most of the U.S. today. This is no mean accomplishment to be deprecated. There is the further point that perhaps highly technological societies developing tremendous potentials for production have no alternative but to seek ever-rising per capita consumption. I wouldn't agree but the point does command a good deal of respectful attention. A number of economic writers have argued, for example, that the annual style change in motorcars has become essential to the economic well-being of the U.S., as it presently functions.

## Other troublesome possibilities

On the other hand I believe that any industrially advanced society that wholeheartedly embraces the concept that the healthy functioning of its economic machine requires efforts to promote ever-higher consumption of goods by its citizens is likely to face some troublesome possibilities. For example:

- Producers that depend to any considerable extent upon some of the strategies I have described are likely to suffer ultimately in competition with producers in other societies that all concentrate on quality and low unit cost.

- Any society that encourages a heavy reliance upon promotion to sell goods is encouraging the rise of business oligarchies. Large producers have a tremendous advantage over small producers with equally fine products in the launching of new products. Promotion, advertising and getting display in launching a new product nationally can be extremely costly. It is not uncommon, for example, for dogfood makers to spend 0,000,000 just to launch a new brand.

- Any advanced society that depends upon ever-higher levels per capita consumption in order to keep its factories humming is going to find itself consuming irreplaceable resources at a prodigious rate. In the U.S. each man, woman and child now requires 20 tons of material a year to sustain his way of life, and this is increasing while the U.S. is being forced to go abroad for more and more of its essential resources such as iron ore, oil and copper. This is not only putting it in competition with newly industrializing countries for the diminishing supply of the earth's resources but is involving the nation deeply in the politics of lands where political institutions are often highly unstable or unpalatable.

- Finally any industrialized society that commits itself to ever-rising consumption must accept as a concomitant an ever-increasing commercialization of its national life. When a society gets more and more into the production of optional goods the citizen can take or leave, more and more persuasion is required to sell each unit. A society dedicated to ever-greater consumption is likely to find tremendous pressures to decorate every pastoral landscape with billboards. Great thrilling songs in such societies tend shortly to turn up with commercialized lyrics for TV



jingles. Selling messages are beamed at the consumer from every direction. In the U.S. today about \$240 a year is spent on each family in the land in order to maintain sales at present levels.

I believe our society, if not our economy, will gain if we return to a passion for quality on the part of each producer of goods and a rise in prudence on the part of our citizens. Further I believe our society must start giving more thought to using resources prudently and establishing a better long-term balance between our population and our resources.

## **ALTERNATIVES OUTLINED**

But as productivity of our automated factories and offices continues to rise what alternatives are there to the strategies cited for keeping our free economy functioning in healthful fashion?

### **Reduced hours of work**

One adjustment we are bound to see, I think, is a substantial further cutting down of the number of hours a year the average person works as the machines become more efficient. We will undoubtedly see more 32-hour work weeks and we will probably find a growing percentage of people who derive much of their livelihood from sources other than paychecks. I believe we need to find acceptable ways to break the present connection between prosperity and full employment. Work is increasingly for machines and perhaps we shall be content to see man relieved of the burden of much of his daily labor. The level of chronic unemployment in the U.S. has been rising persistently, as noted; yet our economy is working better than ever in history in terms of satisfying material needs, wants and whims of the population. One reason for this is that tens of billions of dollars in benefit payments are being pumped into the economy in the form of social security payments, unemployment compensation, veterans' payments and so on. Also we should not overlook the fact that tens of millions of Americans are starting to derive at least some of their income from their new role as shareholders of U.S. corporations.

### **Increased energy on services**

Another shift I think we will see is a much greater proportion of our total energy devoted to the production and consumption

services. In the U.S. in the past year for example there has been a significant rise in the amount of money spent for churches, medical care, personal care, education, travel and other recreation.

### **Facing challenges of cities**

Also I hope that we will see a growing interest on the part of any of our people in facing challenges that have often been neglected in the past because they require unified effort. In the U.S., for example, many cities have grown up in a disheveled, formless way. They have no heart and little in the way of greenery, recreational facilities or good schools. Though such projects are financed by taxes they are executed by private contractors and the payments made for work and materials add to prosperity in much the same way that sale of appliances would. Education not only offers a great opportunity for expansion of effort but offers as well a very great challenge. In competing with Russia—which is pouring a vast amount of its national energy into education—we cannot hope for our way of life to prevail if we focus more and more of our activities in pleasurable and often frivolous consumption. I am vigorously in favor of the good life for all of our people, but I believe we must help upgrade the public's conception of the good life.

### **Helping raise world standard of living**

Finally I hope we will see new interests in helping to raise the standard of living of the two billion people on this planet who are still classified by the United Nations as ill-fed, ill-housed, ill-clothed. The development of outlets for goods in such areas will require a great deal of patient cultivating but we are seeing, in such areas as India and South America, that considerable progress can be made.

## **CONCLUSION**

The twin problems of keeping increasingly automated factories and increasingly schooled people productively busy as abundance increases are indeed vexing ones and will puzzle us more and more in the coming decade. The problem is not just an economic problem. It has spiritual implications and offers a tremendous challenge to us in the exercise of Christian responsibility.



## The moral crisis we face

**T**he attainment of affluence by the United States and, in lesser degree, by a few other nations in Western Europe, is unprecedented. This exceptional situation in man's history on earth confronts the members of an affluent society with new responsibilities and new opportunities for wisdom or folly. As John Kenneth Galbraith has urged in *THE AFFLUENT SOCIETY*, the attainment of well-being by nations requires other ideas than those which were distilled from the experience of grim poverty. One of the major purposes of the book is to clear away "the obsolete and continued preoccupations associated with the assumptions of poverty," thus making it possible "to see for the first time the new tasks and opportunities that are before us." Mr. Galbraith deals largely with economic attitudes and ideas and the social policies which follow from them. Yet it is clear that he has a larger concern than a narrowly conceived economic one. His

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By Elmer J. F. Arndt, Professor, Eden Seminary, Webster Groves, Missouri; and a member of the CCSA Publications Committee.



criticism of widely accepted assumptions and his recommendations are grounded in a conviction that the United States should effectively invest its resources in men rather than continue to direct its efforts to enhance its material investment.

The argument of *THE AFFLUENT SOCIETY* is that concentration of American society on the effectiveness of its material investment would be folly because such concentration would be the wrong goal. Thus an economist joins his voice to that of the Christian theologians who have warned that production and endlessly increased production of material goods provide no way out of the moral crisis that we face.

### **PERENNIAL QUESTION IN NEW CONTEXT**

The wealth of American society raises in a new context the perennial question of the nature and destiny of man. For certainly the achievement of national well-being has not been accompanied by a decrease of interest in the material goals of life but rather by many indications that a gross materialism has gained a marked ascendancy. It appears that the pursuit of pleasure, preoccupation with individual gain, and acquisition of gadgets have become the chief purposes of our lives. Far from release from poverty delivering us from concentration on material goods, our very abundance appears to have generated a climate in which the pursuit of material goods becomes the predominant goal of life. Ironically, at the very time when devotion to the goal of increased production in an already wealthy society appears to be folly, that goal is widely accepted as the way of deliverance from the ills which beset us.

#### **The temptation of wealth**

The ancient admonition of the Deuteronomist is relevant to our situation: "Take heed lest you forget the Lord your God, by not keeping his commandments and his ordinances and his statutes, which I command you this day; lest, when you have eaten and are full, and have built goodly houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks multiply, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt. . . . Beware lest you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have

gotten me this wealth' " (Deuteronomy 8:11-14, 17). In the biblical view, the material goods of existence are a blessing; but wealth is a peril because it tempts man to self-glorification with its concomitant indifference to God and corruption of man's relation to his fellowman. The Bible does not glorify grinding poverty; but both the Old and New Testament writers are sensitively aware that when wealth is made the chief good of life, man is dehumanized and that wealth itself tempts man to that inordinate pride which is the mother of folly.

### **The chief goal**

The Christian faith does not regard physical well-being as an evil but rather as good. Involuntary poverty is certainly not a prerequisite of godliness. But the service of Mammon, the pursuit of wealth as the chief goal in life, is the enemy of godliness. "You cannot serve God and Mammon." For the service of God is a devotion of the whole self to God, which includes the service of fellowmen. Service to God is the chief goal for man's life. Man is created for communion with God. In communion with God, human life finds its fulfillment.

The Christian life has the two-fold aspects of gift and task, of grace and obedience, and the two aspects are inseparable from each other since the Christian moral life has its source and standard in God's grace. The whole context of Christian living is God's free gift of life and new life, of mercy and forgiveness, of reconciliation and victory over the final evils of man's existence. Christian living has its spring not in our achievement but in response to God's self-sacrificial love. It is not grounded in an assertion of the value of the self but rather in receiving as a gift God's bestowal of value. God's valuing of man is the basis of the value of persons. For the Christian, because God is love, love is the ultimate law of life.

### **The ethic of neighbor love**

The Christian answer to the question, What is man for?, is love of God and love of his neighbor. The concern of the Christian in his relation to his neighbor is gratefully to express in deeds toward his neighbor that love with which God in Christ has loved him. Thus the ethic grounded in the Christian faith is an ethic of neighbor love, of the service of fellowmen. The

the other self in his concrete actuality is to be loved, which is to say, the other is to be valued because God has bestowed value on him. To love the other is to serve his well-being. It is the ethic of the servants of the Servant of God.

Christian love is a relation of person to person. To underscore its personal character is not to suggest that it is "individualistic." It is to emphasize that it is the other person who is the object of love rather than a body of principles or a system of values or a code of conduct. Principles, values and codes, no doubt, have their place in guiding Christian living; but when devotion to any of these usurps the place of the other rather than guides and informs our service to the other, the distinctive and essential character of Christian ethics is missed.

### **Guidance provided**

Does such an ethic provide any guidance for an affluent society? Does it illuminate the opportunities and responsibilities of an affluent society? Of course, it is not suggested that specific measures of social policy can be deduced from the Christian ethic. What is suggested is that the Christian ethic does indicate the controlling goals by which specific measures are suggested and judged. That ethic does suggest a standard by which "the national purpose" is evaluated.

## **THE MAJOR QUESTIONS**

First, there is the question of the use to which we shall put our wealth. There is a good deal of thinking which makes production of more and more goods, in a society already abundantly supplied, the chief use of wealth. The processes of production and the increase of production become the dominant concern. Production of things seems to be widely valued for its own sake with the consequence that a "need" must be generated to absorb the production. Such a society evaluates itself in terms of the effectiveness of its material investment—to borrow the phrase used by Mr. Galbraith. The well-being of persons is subordinated to the requirements of production.

The Christian understanding of the nature and destiny of man does not look unappreciatively on the conquest of mass poverty. On the contrary, Christians find in their faith the impulse and incentive to seek the means to overcome the poverty which



thwarts and distorts the development of persons. But the Christian faith and ethic do question the validity of the goal of an indefinite expansion of production. That faith and ethic indicate rather that the conquest of poverty provides an enhanced opportunity for a society to invest its wealth in persons.

Provision for increased educational opportunities is but one illustration of the possibility over-affluence presents for investment in persons. The pursuit of knowledge and the opportunity for an increasing number of persons to participate in the enjoyment and furtherance of the arts and scientific and technological work are made possible in an affluent society on a scale denied a poverty-stricken one.

The reluctance of our society to transfer wealth now available for private spending to education and scientific research indicates the radical reassessment of self-understanding and purposes required by shifting the emphasis from production to emphasis on persons. The question is the question of the ends which a society regards as most urgent. Granted that the most urgent task of a society is, so far as lies in its power, to secure its own survival, the inescapable companion task is to insure, so far as possible, that it is a society worthy to survive. A wealthy society which judges itself by the sole standard of mere increase in material well-being measured solely in terms of its gross national product will find itself the victim of its own insensitivity and folly. Wealth in the case of individuals imposes its responsibilities. So it is also in the case of nations.

### **Pockets of poverty**

A second question concerning the social policy of an affluent nation is posed by the fact that there are pockets of poverty. There are poor people and poor groups of people whose income is below that of the larger community. The fact of such poverty in our rural and urban slums is well known. The causes of such poverty are various and it is beyond our scope to attempt an analysis of the incidence or the reasons for poverty-stricken people in a wealthy society.

The fact of poverty calls for special consideration in an affluent society because the general prevalence of well-being makes it very easy to ignore or to be insensitive to those who do not share in the general wealth. In short, the recognition of

the existence of such persons and a constructive social policy for the improvement of their lot call for a special measure of compassion. Since the poverty-stricken in our society are a minority, they are, for the most part, without the political power to demand reforms which might improve their situation. Thus the very poor are left defenseless in the face of common-sense callousness.

A society characterized by mass poverty is without the means to provide a minimal standard of living for all its members. An affluent society does have the means to do so. Whether it devotes a certain portion of its wealth to provide an adequate diet, education and medical care, at least for the children of poverty-stricken parents so that poverty will not be self-perpetuating; whether it provides decent housing for poor families; whether it provides the social services to assist in remedying deficiencies and handicaps are tests of the compassion of a wealthy society and ultimately a test of the purposes to which it accords high priority. From the Christian standpoint, the moral test of a society is not exhausted by the general equality of its members; it comes to clearest focus in the concern of the larger society for its least privileged members. The Christian community has a special responsibility to bring the fact of the existence of poverty to the attention of the larger society. Such a responsibility will not be popular, for a wealthy society would prefer to ignore the fact of poverty, perhaps because there is an implicit recognition that in a nation as well endowed as we are, poverty is a disgrace to the society which permits it.

### **the glaring contrast**

The third question which confronts a wealthy America arises from the glaring contrast between its high standard of living and the low, bare subsistence levels prevailing among many poorer nations. The question of the kind of assistance the United States should provide and how that aid should be channelled and administered is a large and complicated one. Our present concern is not to raise such questions as the nature of assistance and how such aid is to be administered, important as they are. Rather it is to suggest that it is both the opportunity and responsibility of the United States to give practical recognition to the urgency of making available to other societies afflicted

with hunger and privation the resources which will make possible a better standard of living.

### **GOD'S CONCERN UNIVERSAL**

It is not difficult to show the folly of the attitude which holds that it is possible for the United States to insure its own survival while disregarding the poverty of the great masses of mankind. The Christian concern does not, however, arise from considerations of expediency, although it appears to be the case that here is another point of coincidence between the requirements of Christian ethics and of an intelligent self-interest. The Christian community puts its faith in and gives its loyalty to God who so "loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son." God's concern for man's well-being is universal and inexhaustible. For those who acknowledge themselves to be the recipients of such a love—unmerited and undeserved—it cannot be thinkable that they, so richly endowed, should ignore or be insensitive to the needs of others. Their concern is not that they bend others to support of their purposes by ties of gratitude but rather that they express in their relation to others the spontaneous gratitude of their own hearts.

To expect a nation to motivate its conduct by pure, disinterested love is, no doubt, beyond the limits of the possible. But the question is not the attainability of the heights of love by the nation. The question is rather of our responsibility—a responsibility which our wealth and the possibilities available to man in a world of mass poverty make inescapable.

### **OUR ACCOUNTABILITY**

The theme of responsibility plays such an important role in considering both personal and national goals and both internal and external policy because the Christian community believes in God. That belief means that we are accountable to God and our accountability is measured by our endowments. "Every one to whom much is given, of him will much be required; and of him to whom men commit much they will demand the more" (Luke 12:48).

God in whom we believe requires humility, justice, and mercy. To live according to his commandments is the way of life—for men and for nations.



# The problems of the cornucopia

## *A book review article*

The problems of how to handle abundance may be extremely perplexing but they are certainly pleasant. There is something to handle, for one thing. Scarcity means want, poverty, even starvation; but affluence means sufficiency, opportunity and possible largesse. Of course it may also mean self-indulgence, but who would not trade the delight of one's soul in fatness for the lean and hungry look. In any event, our generation has the novel opportunity of dealing with surpluses rather than shortages. We can cover our folly with lavishness. We can waste untold resources and still have enough to share with many. Economics is no longer a dismal science but an exultant success story.

In a time of superfluity the moral demands upon our stewardship emerge from the cornucopia like an ominous specter. There are no excuses to give us cover. We cannot plead poverty as excuse for our selfishness. Instead of the question, "Are we able to help our neighbor?" we now are plagued with the query, "How can our resources aid and not handicap our neighbor?" There are also questions arising from our prodigal use (and wastage) of our resources. Though they seem to be limitless, do we have any moral right to squander them? Are we really using them to the glory of God and the service of man?

While these problems of affluence are very new, they are beginning to arouse the serious attention of many thoughtful people and engage the minds of many writers. Perhaps no recent volume has caught the imagination of more people than John Kenneth Galbraith's *THE AFFLUENT SOCIETY*. Theologians, as well as economists, are giving it their attention. Among the recent books on this subject we present the positions of an economist businessman and of several theologians to underscore the problems and the possibilities in abundance, the theme of this issue of **SOCIAL ACTION**.

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Ray Gibbons, Director, Council for Christian Social Action.

**Stewardship in Contemporary Theology**, edited by T. K. Thompson. New York: Association Press, 1960, \$3.50.

Part of the fascination of this book is the way in which one's concept of stewardship grows through enrichment as he reads through the contributions of the nine authors. Anyone who conceives of stewardship as a sermon topic for budget Sunday is due for a surprise. He discovers that the "steward" in Biblical times was a household manager or overseer, a tenant or a servant, and sometimes designated a disciple. Stewardship is so much more than management of one's money. As T. A. Kantonen defines it, "Stewardship deals with man's management of his life as conditioned by his relation to God."

This becomes lustrously clear in the gospels. Jesus interprets his own ministry as that of a steward or servant. He is a steward who gives everything, including his very life. As Warren A. Quanbeck points out, "we encounter [in Jesus] a strange and frightening person" who reinterpreted the Old Testament, rejected the tradition of the elders, and made the breathtaking assertion that he himself was the meaning of the Old Covenant, yet who, at the same time, appeared as the humblest of men. As Dr. Thompson states, "Stewardship rightly understood is equivalent to a program for putting Christ into all aspects of daily life."

### **The development of the book**

According to the editor, the Reverend Thomas K. Thompson, Executive Director of the Department of Stewardship and Benevolence of the National Council of Churches, the purposes of this book are: (1) to increase one's understanding of his personal stewardship; (2) to reconcile methods of support with the Christian ideal; and (3) to show the responsibility of citizens of the United States in a needy world. The book is admirably designed to serve the needs of pastors and preachers and other leaders of the churches concerned with securing church support. But since it deals also with responsibility for the neighbor, whether he be a church member or not, it is useful for any Christian wishing to deepen his understanding of the Gospel.

The process by which this book developed began with a Conference on Stewardship, held by the Department of Stewardship and Benevolences, July 15-17, 1959, at Wagner College, Staten

and, N. Y. The nine theologians who read papers were selected because they had previously shown a particular interest in one another aspect of the subject.

- *Dr. Richard L. Sheef, Jr., of Eden Theological Seminary deals with the Old Testament backgrounds for stewardship and tithing.* He shows that property rights were such as to protect the interests of related members of the family, and that in the sabbatical year there was an attempt at conservation practices. Private property was to be used not only for family but to help the poor and the dispossessed. Tithing was not originally part of the law but associated with worship. Sometimes the tenth was assumed by the giver in the central sanctuary, sometimes contributed for the Levite or a person in need.

- *Dr. Warren A. Quanbeck of Luther Theological Seminary shows how Jesus taught and exemplified stewardship.*

He did not regard his life as his own, to be disposed of in accordance with his own wishes or ambitions, but saw it as a trust from God, and lived in continual dependence upon the will of the Father. . . . His stewardship was not something given, complete and perfect from the beginning of the ministry, but an achievement worked out in hourly and daily obedience to God. By his own life of submission he invested the title of servant or steward with immense dignity, and thus made it possible for others to follow in the way of obedience.

- *Dr. Holmes Rolston of the Presbyterian (U.S.) Board of Christian Education directs our attention for the study of stewardship to two principal parts of the Pauline Epistles.* The first is Corinthians, Chapters 8 and 9, in which Paul discusses the offering that he is taking for the suffering saints in Jerusalem. The second is I Timothy, Chapter 6, which gives a really matured philosophy of Christian stewardship. For Paul the problem of stewardship was not raising money for the church but the spiritual development of the people. He charged the rich to be humble, to put their trust in God and not in money, to use their resources to do good, to minister to the saints and to further the Gospel, finding the true riches of life in the process. Dr. Rolston weaves a rich tapestry portraying the genuine wealth of the Christian man.



● *Dr. Luther P. Powell, pastor of a Presbyterian Church in Iowa, shows how the "oblation" motive for giving developed in the early church. In the Middle Ages giving alms was supposed to earn merit for the giver. So arose the system of indulgences, adoration of relics, and pilgrimages to holy places. Salvation depended on the ability to produce the necessary money. The system of tithing was a form of taxation, a church tax on all kinds of profit or increase, supported by civil law. Unfortunately the infamous system of church taxation and compulsory tithing continued after the Reformation, although the sale of indulgences was discontinued. It was ultimately the antagonism of the laity to the whole system of compulsory tithing and the church rates which led to their abolition. In its place the churches used lotteries, merchandising schemes, revenue producing property or voluntary giving. Under the impact of missions and the laymen's movements the practice of tithing revived. As Dr. Powell states, "There is no question but that the profit motive (material rewards for tithing) had a great influence in promoting the practice of tithing." He concludes, "As Christ dominates the actions of the church, the voluntary principle takes its rightful place in stewardship."*

● *Dr. Robert Paul Roth, dean of the graduate school, Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, believes that tithing grows out of an intimate partnership with God. Because of the growing interest in tithing a whole chapter is devoted to its history, its Biblical foundations, and its theological interpretation. The author believes it is an essential part of the gospel.*

How we handle our material goods is not then a matter of settling an account under the law . . . but rather it is a matter of handling Christ himself. This holy materialism, for that is what the stewardship of God's good and holy creature is, shatters both the gnostic exaltation of the spirit at the expense of the material, and also the Jewish perversion of the law as against the gospel. . . . When we examine how the grace of God takes the fallen, natural creature out of death into life, we find the true basis for all Christian stewardship. . . . Then our giving is spontaneous, outgoing, sacrificial, loving, edifying.

● *Christian theology has its feet firmly planted on the ground in Dr. T. A. Kantonen's chapter on "Stewardship and Christian*

ctrine." The professor of Systematic Theology at Hamma-  
 nity School shows that the primary concern of stewardship  
 "to translate legitimate Christian speech into vital Christian  
 ion." Everything depends upon grasping the relation between  
 ine sovereignty and human responsibility. We work out our  
 vation with fear and trembling because God is at work in us,  
 h to will and to work his good pleasure. God's will does not  
 plement or supplant man's will but "empowers it, directs it,  
 lizes itself through it." Stewardship implies fulfillment of  
 obligations imposed by our membership in the various orders  
 which we are placed—the home, the state, the church. But  
 s is not enough. The laws of stewardship become a mirror in  
 ich we can see our true selves for the practice of stewardship  
 flects us to ourselves. Stewardship also becomes a guide for  
 e regeneration of our life, an expression of restored, direct  
 onal relation to God. It is the human response to divine  
 ice. "Giving is in the first instance not a human activity at all,  
 t originates in the creative depths of the heart of God and  
 eals to us his inmost nature. God so loves that he gives."  
 atitude to God "is the conscious motivation of Christian  
 wardship. . . ." It is first of all an act of worship, then an act  
 service to others.

● Dr. Edgar M. Carlson, president of *Gustavus Adolphus*  
*College*, presents the thought of two Swedish theologians, Einar  
 ling and Gustaf Wingren, in relating the Christian sense of  
 eation to stewardship. Our calling educates us, serves our  
 ighbor, and contributes to community life. Stewardship is the  
 eptance of one's duties and one's neighbors as our duty owed  
 God. In a money economy in which we exchange goods and  
 vices for currency it is still work, service, and calling which  
 e are responsible for using to the glory of God and the service  
 our neighbor. "The discipline of giving is a part of the daily  
 ing, the crucifying of self, which belongs to the most spiritual  
 ssion which the church has been given."

● One of the most unusual chapters in the book is that on  
*Wealth and Taxation: The Ethics of Stewardship*, by Joseph  
 etcher, professor of social ethics at the Episcopal Theological  
 hool, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Both poverty and wealth  
 ve built-in dangers; the one means destitution and the other  
 ds to the idolization of wealth.

In past ages stewardship was carried out against a background of widespread poverty in agrarian and low-energy societies, but today Americans live in comparative opulence. There are still many in dire need—the non-employables through prejudice, accident, or debility but far more people than formerly have enough and to spare. Another gap exists between *private opulence* and *public poverty*—health, education, the arts and the spiritual life. And yet people generally resist the taxes which provide these public goods and services. Dr. Fletcher declares: "Stewardship is taxation, local or federal, whether as a voluntary discipline privately exercised or a corporate and civil matter. Stewardship, vocation, and Christian citizenship coincide." Dr. Fletcher proposed more taxes on consumption, similar to sales taxes, rather than more taxes on production.

The human needs that cry aloud for stewardship are on the social scale and require social structures and socially administered forms of response—chiefly, I suggest, a tax on opulence. Anything less than this is micro-ethics, petty moralism.

● *The concluding chapter on "Stewardship in an Economy of Abundance," by Dr. A. T. Rasmussen, professor of social ethics at the Pacific School of Religion, considers how abundance can become either a blessing or a curse but always liable to corruption. As Russell Lynes points out in SURFEIT OF HONEY, "prosperity produces not only plenty but curiously empty values and a national uneasiness." We become anxious because we have so much to lose, not free individuals but lost individuals. Our over-emphasis upon production has resulted in a shallow materialism.*

In such an age of automation, planned obsolescence, and advertising stewardship requires us to plunge into practical affairs "as both critic and participant in doing whatever can be done to steer our productive energies into meeting the higher good of the community of neighbors. We are called of Christ to be creative as well as productive, to be persons and not pawns . . . to resist the dominance of external forces. . . . A truly committed support of the Christian Church can be generated among our laymen only when they begin to understand the basic 'over-againstness' of the church in tension with the world, and the transforming work of God in Christ of which it is the imperfect communicator."



One could wish that the book had expanded the treatment of the last two chapters. Concepts of stewardship applicable in an age when property was the principal source of wealth are hardly applicable in an age when wealth and power are vested in the managements of production. The typical American consumer, as reported on "Consumers of Abundance" by Gerard Piel points out, "owns no property in the classical meaning of the term. Out of current income he pays for services currently rendered. Out of income set aside in social security taxes and in pension and insurance funds, he reserves a claim on services to be rendered in the future." The real decisions of stewardship must be faced by managements and by consumers who own claims on services rather than pieces of property.

This comment in no way minimizes the value of the book but subjects the problem for another consultation of theologians and another book on "Stewardship in the Contemporary Economy."

**GOOD AND THE RICH SOCIETY**, by D. L. Munby. Oxford University Press, 1961.

This brief book of 179 pages with its three appendices is the revised text of the Edward Cadbury Lectures, given in Birmingham University in 1960. The author, D. L. Munby, fellow at All Souls College, Oxford, is an economist who has been influenced by his participation in World Council of Churches discussions. As a member of the Church of England he is helpfully critical of what the churches can and should do about our rich society. His approach to theological and ethical issues is that of an economist earnestly seeking to reconcile Christian teaching with our technological economy, dodging none of the real issues.

**Mr. Munby states that his purpose is** "to see what light can be shed on our economic arrangements in the middle twentieth century from Christian sources by the judgment of one Christian." He does not begin by stating the principles of the Christian faith and then indicating their relevance to the contemporary economy. Rather he begins by asking what are the dominant economic trends of these times and what is their significance. He deals chiefly with the growth of economic organization, the increase of resources, the rapidity of social

change, the accumulation of capital, the expansion of enterprise, the development of new resources and new products. He sees an expanding economy "in which people are subject to changes in their work, their consumption patterns, their environment, and the whole fabric of their lives." He not only is concerned with change but he considers security in such areas as employment, income, place of residence, prices, and consumption patterns. What are the positive achievements in these respects as seen from a Christian perspective?

He does not equate the wealth of a particular nation or class as evidence of God's approval but as an act of divine Providence requiring a moral response. Those who have received much owe not only gratitude to God but sharing with their fellowmen. This moral duty is elaborated in terms of economic practices.

● *In his chapter on "God and Wealth" the author deals with the issues in an affluent society as the title, "God and the Rich Society," would lead one to expect.* He reminds us of the great wealth which is ours because our ancestors labored with skill and diligence. As a result of their labors we have a great enlargement of choice, more education, greater productivity of goods, services and leisure. This enlargement of human choice "is all part of God's design for man." The author regards economic progress "as a creative process by which human behavior is altered and human choices refashioned in irreversible ways by small groups in the community." Enlargement of choice has not invariably resulted in making the right choices but neither are the evils of advertisement, the cheapening of our tastes the inevitable result of our enlargement of choice. Urbanization, industrialization, and the cultural impoverishment resulting from our mass media of communication are ugly facts of our present economy but something can and will be done about them. "If many of the physical surroundings of [urban man's] daily life are badly made and tasteless, he is neither so degraded by dirt nor so brutalized by violence as our ancestors, whose streets were filled with dung, and whose amusements included bear-baiting and public executions." If we are worse off than they it is because we have chosen the lesser values in our vastly expanded range of choice.

Wealth in itself is not an evil but a temptation to evil.

The economic level of our life has been raised to a plane where the poorest in Britain today are better off than the "rich" in New Testament times. But much remains to be done about the style of our life as exhibited by our tastes. Here the church leadership has dismally failed to guide us. "When enormous power is given by the market to a few more or less irresponsible money-makers to set the pattern of public taste, the result is intolerable."

● In his chapter on "Fair Shares?" Mr. Munby considers the problems of just distribution in a wealthy nation. "It is no longer possible to have pools of human squalor within the wider community of the more or less well-off." He might have added that this is no longer necessary or morally tolerable. Education, the growth of unions, and other centers of popular power in democratic society have tended to reduce the extremes of wealth and poverty. Such fundamental forces making for greater community and equality Christians should recognize as the work of the hand of God. "We are being called today to realize them [community and equality] in the particular forms of community and equality that a modern industrial system brings forth."

In dealing with the fair distribution of wealth Mr. Munby considers payment according to "worth," need, or equality but finds these criteria inadequate. Rather he prefers to let the mechanism of the market determine income and then to use the income tax as a way to correct injustices resulting from the free play of economic forces. The claims of equality, he believes, can best be met by attention to the tax system, capital ownership, capital gains, and the use of expenditure taxes.

● In his chapter on "Sharing the World's Wealth" the figures Mr. Munby gives are in pounds sterling and the taxes required are those imposed by the British Government, but otherwise the problem of a wealthy nation in a world of poverty is applicable to the United States. "Our over-all performance has not been such as might have been expected from a country as rich as Britain." And he might have said the same for the United States. Christians have a special responsibility to quicken the conscience of fellow citizens about their world-wide obligations. There is nothing particularly novel about Mr. Munby's analysis of conflict and cooperation as evident in great unions,



corporations or other economic institutions. He considers it right and necessary for groups to organize "to insure proper representation of [their] interests." It is a tribute to the toughness of society that competitiveness as well as cooperation has produced flexibility and increased stability in the economy.

A Christian's stewardship is to help "bring the large-scale the impersonal, the mechanical and the complex within the range of human comprehension." We may be able to begin at the top and at the centers of power but in any event we can deal with the particular sectors of the economy for which we are most responsible. "The human way to study human society is to proceed in the limited terms possible to the human mind." We must humanize the complexities of life as far as we are able.

● *The concluding chapter on "The Christian Impact" deals specifically with the church situation in Great Britain where there has been little study of Christian social ethics, and where the established church has been singularly silent on social policies affecting the economic order.* "It seems to me, then, that there is a place for statements which aim to educate people to the fundamental issues . . . and to show how these issues are related to the essential tenets of the Christian faith." He recommends advisory committees of laymen and church leaders concerned with particular problems, vocational groups, and lay centers for study and discussion.

"Our wealth is overwhelming; only let us be careful that it does not overwhelm us!" Business enterprise is fluid and adaptable but the world is undergoing revolutionary changes. We must be ready and willing to share God-given riches. "We have opportunities never before known in human history, and the greatest opportunity of all, in that we can see ever-widening horizons before us." On this highly optimistic note Mr. Munby concludes his lectures.

American readers may be annoyed by the use of the British economy as a frame of reference but the book deals specifically with the problems of a particular affluent nation and therefore speaks most pertinently to our present situation. It may bring a few new insights to professors of social ethics but it is a book for Christian businessmen and practical people who seek more light on the relevance of God's providence to their nation's wealth and the world's poverty.





## A CHRISTIAN APPROACH TO ABUNDANCE

lai E. Stevenson, writing in *Harper's Magazine*, August 1961 ("America Under Pressure"), declares that: "We are the healthiest society in depth that the world has ever seen. More people enjoy more comfort than any previous time." He concludes: "Three-quarters of mankind still live in a poverty so grinding, in such pitiful conditions of health and livelihood, that the framework of their brief existence is not very distant from Hobbes' definition: 'nasty, brutal, and short.'" In these two statements is set forth the pre-ment of the American Christian. He lives in comfort, enjoys a high standard of living, indulges in displays of affluence, while at the same time people in neighboring countries are starved, undereducated and severely limited as to mobility and vocational choices. The pertinent questions: "Who is my neighbor?" and "What is my responsibility for him?" have become urgently relevant in our time.

### in a public forum

It is suggested that in order to bring the issues and problems involved in an economy of abundance before the Christian

community, a public forum be arranged along the lines of the TV program, "The Nation's Future." Select two capable speakers to debate the question, "Should the Church endorse legislation to redistribute the wealth?" Have a moderator to state the question, to introduce the speakers and to keep the time. Allow each speaker ten minutes for his opening statement. Ten minutes should be provided for cross-examination and debate, and then thirty minutes for questions from the audience.

The speakers might draw freely from the articles by Elmer J. F. Arndt and Vance Packard in this issue of *SOCIAL ACTION*. The two chapters: "Wealth and Taxation: The Ethics of Stewardship" by Joseph Fletcher, and "Stewardship in an Economy of Abundance" by Albert Terrill Rasmussen in *STEWARDSHIP IN CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY* will provide additional resource material. (See book review on p. 22.)

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It would be advisable to have copies of this issue of SOCIAL ACTION and STEWARDSHIP IN CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY on hand for members of the audience who may wish to take copies home as a result of the discussion.

Church people in our day must face the imbalance between our private opulence and our public poverty. John Kenneth Galbraith (THE AFFLUENT SOCIETY)<sup>1</sup> declares that the *social balance* between private goods and services and public goods and services will have to be established by an *investment balance* between investing in material goods and investing in human and cultural values—in things like smoke abatement, urban renewal, the battle against juvenile delinquency, reforestation, educational grants and scholarships, art centers, church support, scientific research.

There is also the question of distributing purchasing power in creative ways other than salaries and wages paid out for goods-production. Is the answer to be found in some system of a graduated sales tax which would apply the principle of "ability to pay" to the sales tax just as it

is applied to the income tax?

The old classical question of asceticism vs. materialism is with us in a new form. The Biblical ethic takes material goods seriously, giving approval or disapproval according to their use and assigning no inherent or intrinsic value to them in and of themselves. Still there are scholars who believe that "detachment" and "non-possessiveness" are spiritual values (See AMERICAN INCOME AND ITS USES, p. 317).<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of the meeting should be to stimulate discussion and study on a Christian approach to the problems of opulence and abundance. Jesus said: "Life does not consist in the abundance of things that a man possesses." Yet our society is surfeited with things and makes the easy assumption that the good life is synonymous with the acquisition of material possessions. What is the Christian answer to the problem of abundance?

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<sup>1</sup> *The Affluent Society*, by John Kenneth Galbraith. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1958.

<sup>2</sup> *American Income and Its Uses*, by Elizabeth Hoyt, et al. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954.